

*August 30, 2015*

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-10:*

***“Be on Guard, and Keep Your Soul Diligently”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I would like to set in front of you again the opening words of our Old Testament lesson for this morning:

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you (Deuteronomy 4:1-2).

Before I comment on how this passage applies to us in the New Testament, it is important for you to realize something about the statutes and rules (the commandments) that the Lord gave to Israel. These statutes and rules (the commandments) were given *after* their deliverance from their slavery in Egypt. And it is just as vital to realize that their deliverance from their slavery in Egypt was entirely a picture pointing to the salvation that would come through the Messiah - Jesus Christ - who has saved us from our slavery to sin, death, and the devil. Again, the statutes and rules (the commandments) were given *after* their deliverance. That means that salvation does not come by observing the law. God did not give the commandments for people to work their way to heaven. So then, why did God give the commandments?

He gave his commandments to his people for the same reason that he gives us commandments in the New Testament. As we learn in *Luther's Small Catechism*, "the Law teaches us Christians what we should and should not do to lead a God-pleasing life (a guide). The power to live according to the Law comes from the Gospel." Having been saved in the perfect life, sufferings, and death of Jesus our Savior we strive to live according to the commandments because we know that "love is the fulfillment of the law," as Paul writes in Romans 13:10. In other words, we love Jesus because he first loved us, and we love others. We want to do good and we strive to do what is right because he has done everything good for us in his life and death. We also know that the commandments in the Christian life serve as a warning not to fall away. The commandments do not save us, but they warn us to avoid evil for fear that we might lose God and all that he gives.

Again, in the Catechism we are reminded that the commandments of God are a "guide" to the Christian. A fairly well-known passage that might help us to illustrate all of this is Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." The Christian is walking along a path. Without the light it becomes dark. If you have ever been on a trail at night with no light, you know how easy it can be to stray off the path and become lost. You know how dangerous this can be. There are rocks and holes, other paths that lead you away from your destination, maybe even drop offs and wild animals. And the feet are generally fine when there is light to see, but take away the light and it is easy to stumble and fall on the way to the bathroom at night. There are consequences for extinguishing the light of God's Word.

It is very important then to have and use God's Word as Christian people. It is important that we heed the commandments and avoid sin like the plague that it really is. We don't want to do something that

would leave us in a state of unbelief. We don't want to lose all that the Lord has given to us in our salvation. We don't want to face Judgement without the blood of Jesus. Our Old Testament lesson begins by saying that "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you." The light of God's Word is essential to our survival. It is flawless. God is a shield to those who take refuge in him (Proverbs 30:5, 6).

The words of the book of Revelation continue with this theme. It says "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:18-19)." Listening to the Word of God and living the commandments is important to us because we do not want to destroy what God has given to us. There are consequences for sin. That is why we are told: **Be On Guard, And Keep Your Soul Diligently.** We do not desire to destroy and lose faith.

It was not a part of our Old Testament lesson, but in between verses 2 and 6 it says this: "Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal Peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today (Deuteronomy 4:3-4)." To make a long story short, Baal Peor was not a good memory for the people of Israel. East of the Jordan river, opposite Jericho, Moabite women seduced Israelite men to join them in worshipping Baal. This particular incident was provoked by a man named Balaam. The apostle Peter says that Balaam forsook the right way and went astray. He loved gain from wrongdoing. In his lust for gain, he provoked the incident, and the Lord commanded Moses to put to death all who had been involved in the rebellion; in one day 24,000 died in the plague. Incidentally, Balaam later died by the sword when the Israelites move into the land of Moab (Joshua 13:22).

In his commentary on *Deuteronomy*, Mark E. Braun makes this powerful observation about the incident at Baal Peor. He writes:

Why did Moses recall this unhappy history? God means business with his law. He's just as serious about his threats as he is about his promises. It won't do us any good to say, "I don't want a God like that." It's God's nature to hate sin and punish sinners, but it's also God's nature to love sinners and to forgive them for the sake of Jesus. When God's law scares us to death, it won't work to pretend his law doesn't exist. The only remedy is to go running to the gospel.

More often than we would like to admit, we do not take God seriously in his threats as we ought, and that is a very dangerous business. Ask those who were involved in the rebellion at Baal Peor and died. Ask Ananias and Sapphira who in the New Testament (Acts 5:1-11) immediately dropped dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit. May that never be for us!

If we are not taking God seriously today as we should, then perhaps we should consider the repentance of David or the apostle Peter and the fact that we are still alive and have yet to suffer as the

Israelites at Baal Peor or as Ananias and Sapphira. In the case of David, the prophet Nathan exposed him. With Peter, the Lord Jesus looked at him in the courtyard and he heard the rooster crow and wept bitterly. Both David and Peter slipped into a terrible spiritual state, and that can happen to any one of us. God in his mercy chose to lift them out. May he do the same for all of us who might have been or are currently allowing sin to have its way.

For those who are sitting like a David or Peter, God does not bind up our wounds until we acknowledge and deplore sin. David was forgiven and Peter was restored - all because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ - it was totally undeserved. Therefore, we run to the Gospel. In his *Sacred Meditations*, the Lutheran theologian John Gerhard said these beautiful words in the form of a prayer:

Truly, Christ has born our griefs and carried our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4). O Lord Jesus, the eternal punishment which we deserve for our sins You have transferred to Yourself; the weight of iniquity which would have sunk us down to hell You have taken upon Yourself. You were wounded for our transgressions; You were bruised for our iniquities; with your stripes we are healed; and the Lord has laid upon You the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:5, 6). Wonderful, indeed, is the exchange You make; our sins You take upon Yourself, and Your righteousness You impute to us; the death due us for our transgressions You do suffer, and bestow eternal life upon us. Therefore I can no longer doubt Your grace or despair on account of my sins.

In such forgiveness, the words of our Old Testament lesson echo in our ears. **Be On Guard, And Keep Your Soul Diligently** so that you do not forget and that your heart does not slip away. Or, in the words of Paul in Ephesians 6:10, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." If we aren't already, it's time to take God seriously.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott